Journal of the Short Story in English
Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

41 | Autumn 2003
JSSE twentieth anniversary

John McGahern - b. 1934

Linda Collinge and Emmanuel Vernadakis

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/314
ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher
Presses universitaires d'Angers

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 September 2003
Number of pages: 123-141
ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference
Linda Collinge and Emmanuel Vernadakis, « John McGahern - b. 1934 », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 41 | Autumn 2003, Online since 30 July 2008, connection on 07 May 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/314

John McGahern - b. 1934

Linda Collinge and Emmanuel Vernadakis

EDITOR'S NOTE

Interview organized by Linda Collinge and Emmanuel Vernadakis for the *JSSE* 20th, anniversary celebration, May 24, 2003

> John McGahern's work has dominated the Irish literary landscape for almost forty years. First rendered famous by his first novel *The Barracks*, the writer then underwent the painful process of censorship and self-imposed exile after the banning of *The Dark*. If the following novels, *The Leavetaking*, *The Pornographer* and *Amongst Women* have aroused increasing interest in his work and attracted praise and controversy, the three collections of short stories, *Nightlines* (1970), *Getting Through* (1978) and *HighGround* (1985), together with the stories published separately, have definitely ensured McGahern's place as a master of the genre, a stylist and a poet. The shape of the short story has enabled the writer to build up patiently a microcosm through a microcosmic form and to refine his manner "increasingly experimental and conscious of its own patterns as poetic fiction" to quote Denis Sampson.Liliane Louvel, *JSSE* n°34

The early years as a reader/writer.

Liliane LOUVEL: John, we'd like to know how you started to think of yourself as a writer. Did you, as a young boy, start inventing stories or writing stories? When did it all start? What were the first stories you wrote?

John MCGAHERN: I don't think that you can be a writer without being a reader first. At first, I read for nothing but pleasure. And I still think pleasure is the best guide to what is good in literature. There were few books in our house, a few that belonged to my mother when she was training as a teacher and a few nationalistic books that belonged to my father. When I was ten or eleven, I was given the run of a library. The library was in a Protestant house, and was mostly a 19th century library. For about five or six years, maybe more than that, I would have come on my bicycle with an oilcoth shopping bag, returning five or six books and picking new books from the shelves to take away.

Nobody gave me direction or advice. There was a ladder for getting to the books on the high shelves. I gave a public interview before a large crowd when *That They May Face the Rising Sun* appeared. The Moroneys turned up, mother and son, and presented me with a book from the library. They had heard me praise the family and acknowledged my debt, to them and the library. A lot of life is luck. There were all sorts of books. There were classics: Shakespeare, Webster, Ford, Dickens, a lot of Scott, books from the 19th century Lending Libraries, and cowboy books, lots of Zane Grey, and many books about the Rocky Mountains. And then side by side with those books, I used to read the weekly comics like *The Rover*, *The Hotspur, The Wizard, The Champion*. We were addicted to them at school. They were swapped and passed around. There was no television, few radios, and there was no cinema. One day I was reading in the barracks with my back to the window on the river and my sisters were very amused that I was lost in the book. They removed my shoes and put a straw hat on my head, they did all sorts of things with me and I didn't notice until they moved the chair, and I suddenly woke into their amusement and the day.

I think that the way you read changes very gradually. I don't like the word - but I can't find any other - a certain consciousness happens. A child thinks it is going to live forever. Then, gradually, we know that we are going to die, and that everybody dies, and nobody lives forever. We realize that all stories are more or less the same story, and that the quality of the writing and the way the material is seen through a personality becomes more important than the actual story or the pattern out of which the material is shaped.

My first publications were the essays I wrote at school. Sometimes they were read out by the teacher as examples, and that doesn't increase one's popularity. Words had a physical presence for me, and when I began to write it was with no thought of publication. It always has fascinated me that if you change a single word in a sentence all the other words demand to be rearranged. All words have a weight or lightness, a physical weight. At first, I was playing with words to see what shapes would come. Each of us inhabits a private world which others cannot see, and it is with this world that we read. What I was trying to do while playing with words was to see if I could dramatize and bring to life that private world which first found its expression through reading.

I wrote a first novel with a pretentious title, *The End or Beginning of Love*. A friend was interested in it, Jimmy Swift, who was also responsible for getting Patrick Kavanagh into print at the time, liked it and sent it to his brother, Patrick Swift, who was editing a magazine called *X* in London with the poet David Wright. They liked it and published an extract. That was my first time in print. The magazine was influential, though, like most magazines of the kind, it was short lived. Many painters, like Francis Bacon, Lucien Freud, Frank Auerbach, Michael Andrews, wrote for the magazine. I met these people when the magazine invited me to London. I was in my early twenties. I had very little experience of the world and found the bohemian lives around Soho fairly alarming.

The extract in *X* attracted interest from a number of publishers. Fabers, among other publishers, wrote to me. T. S. Eliot was working at the firm then. They invited me to 24 Russell Square for an interview. By that time I had decided that I didn't want to publish the novel. I didn't think it was good enough. They wanted to see the novel, but I told them I wasn't prepared to publish it but that I would write them another novel if they

would give me a contract. Peter de Sautoy was the director who saw me. He became a friend. Charles Monteith, who became my editor, was on holiday. Peter said "Why do you want a contract?" I must have laughed. "By the time I finish the novel, if I have no contract and you lose interest in me, I'll be as badly off as I am now." They gave me a contract: Seventy-five pounds on signature and another seventy-five pounds on delivery of the manuscript. Peter asked me "what is the novel about," and I said "boredom in a police barracks." "Most novels about boredom have the habit of being boring themselves," Peter replied, and I assured him, with the foolish confidence of youth, that it all depended on who wrote them.

Charles Monteith was a big man, an impressive editor, and a friend of Philip Larkin's and many writers. He had the reputation of having rewritten William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. He demanded that I enter *The Barracks* for the A.E. Memorial Award, which was the most prestigious award in Ireland at that time. It was given to writers under 35 for the best work in the previous five years. The award was named after the writer and mystic, A.E. Patrick Kavanagh was the first winner, and it had always been given to poets. I didn't want to enter because I didn't think I stood a chance, and I would have to submit five copies. Typing them was expensive. Montheith insisted that I enter. He said that he would pay for the typing if I didn't get the award and I would pay for all the expenses if I won. I entered, and, to my amazement, won, and most of the award went on the typing, but I was very happy.

There was a very popular writer in Ireland at the time called John D. Sheridan, who wrote for the *Irish Independent*, which was the most popular newspaper. My father was always suspicious of my writing and he was always saying – because John D. Sheridan was a humorist – you should write like John D. Sheridan. My father didn't read or didn't approve of writing, but he liked giving advice, and John D. Sheridan was his god. What he didn't know was that Sheridan was a serious man who had written textbooks on Shakespeare. And it must have been a disastrous day for my father when he opened his favourite newspaper. Across the top of the book page he saw "Classical tragedy comes to *The Barracks*." John D. Sheridan was the reviewer. John D. Sheridan was never referred to again in the house.

I sent my father a copy of *The Barracks* (the character in *The Barracks* isn't my father at all, and in fact Elizabeth is completely imagined. The man in *The Barracks* is a nicer man than my father, but he was a police sergeant like my father) and I got this reply: "An old police sergeant is sitting here in the dark and waiting until the lamp flickers or at least shows light. Love, Daddy." That was the response. *The Barracks* was never mentioned again.

Ben FORKNER: When did you leave home?

J.McG.: I left home at eighteen. I had university scholarships, and I got a call to the teachers' training college. Some of the best brains in the country went to the training college at that time because the State paid for your education for the two years and promised you a fairly secure job at a time when jobs were like gold dust. If I'd gone to university, I would have had to get first place in my class every year to keep one of the scholarships, as otherwise I couldn't afford to stay there, and I knew I wouldn't have been able to take that kind of strain. I also had a vague idea that I wanted to be a writer, and the short school hours were an attraction. We did no work in the training college.

We needed eighty or ninety per cent to get into the college and only forty per cent to get out.

B.F.: So you were writing even at that time?

J.McG.: No, I wasn't writing then. It may have been there as an impossible dream. The training college was a strange place. Any education I picked up there was from other students. There wasn't a literary society, there wasn't a debating society, there wasn't a drama society, but there were a number of religious societies. We had to attend Mass every morning and Devotions every evening. We were being trained as non-commissioned officers to the priests in running the different parishes throughout Ireland, secondary to the priest in all things, including education. The Catholic Church had total power in Ireland at the time. Non-attendance at Mass or any character deviation meant immediate expulsion from the college. They weren't interested in education. What was under inspection at all times was our characters. They wanted us to be obedient and conformist – cogs in a wheel of power.

B.F.: Did the priests supervise your reading too?

J.McG.: No. They weren't interested in books or reading. They thought you read only for exams. I became friendly with a brilliant classmate, Eanna O hEithir, who was from the Aran Islands. He was a nephew of the writer Liam O Flaherty. He gave me Eliot and Joyce to read. Joyce was never banned, contrary to popular belief, but the books weren't displayed in bookshops. The copy of *Ulysses* I bought at the time was produced from under the counter and wrapped in brown paper before it was handed to me. I asked why it wasn't displayed on the shelves, and was told that it would offend the priests from the university, who were the bookshop's best customers. Early Yeats was well known and in the school books, but not the great later poems. The writers that were recommended were those approved of by the Catholic Church, like Canon Sheehan. Also, a few French writers like Mauriac and Bloy and, strangely enough, Stendhal. They were indulgent to French writers in translation because of the Catholic tradition there. I don't think they knew very much about it.

L.L.: Is that when you started reading Flaubert and Proust and…?

J.McG.: It would be more Stendhal, Balzac and Rousseau, and then, later, people like Céline and Camus. Proust was much later, as was Flaubert and many others.

B.F.: The training college lasted during what we would call the academic year, but what did you do in summer?

J.McG.: I didn't want to go home. I really was fed up of home – I didn't want to see the barracks again. When I was well known, about fifteen years ago, a deputation came from Cootehall village, wanting me to buy the barracks and set myself up as some kind of a monument there. I told them that I had spent almost twenty years trying to get out of the place, and that I had no intention of buying my way back in.

B.F.: So you just took odd jobs in the summer or…?

J.McG.: That first summer I went to England, to London, and I worked as a labourer on the buildings. The story "Hearts of Oak" came partly out of that experience. I was absolutely amazed to set foot in England for the first time because to me this was the land of Shakespeare and Wordsworth. I would have read many English classics, and for me it was like stepping on sacred soil. Then I took the train from Holyhead to London. I was met on the platform by people from a Catholic organization. They were watching out for young Irish boys like myself who might go wrong if let loose in London. They

took me back to a Catholic hostel. I was very glad to find a place, and I stayed there for the whole of the summer. The hostel was in Whitechapel, close to Brick Lane and Algate and the London Hospital. It was run by priests and doubled as a school during the day. There was also a church on the grounds and a respectable dancehall. Each morning, before I left for the buildings, I used to have to help the other men put away the bunk beds and replace them with school desks. When we came back in the evening, we were given a big meal. This was cooked by young Irish girls who came from Cork and Kerry mostly. Any sexual play or interference with these girls meant immediate expulsion. I met a man who worked in a bookshop there who told me about current books and a very refined Englishman – looking back, I think he had a crush on me – and he gave me books on philosophy and religion, which we read and discussed on weekends. I was so tired after the work on the buildings that in the evenings I just wanted to watch television, which was new to me, and he used to get annoyed at this.

When I was qualified as a teacher I didn't get a job immediately.O hEither and I were very excited by *Waiting for Godot*, which was playing in the little Pike Theatre in Dublin when we were in the training college. For some strange reason, the dean allowed us to put on sketches on Saturday nights, and O hEither and I did a short sketch about the training college, loosely based on *Godot*. We had a full house. The only competition we had were prayers in the college chapel. The dean stormed out of the audience in a rage and stopped the show. Looking back, it was probably harmless fun, but no doubt with some pretension, but I think O hEither and I came within a whisker of being expelled.

The dean was an extraordinary figure. I used him slightly in a completely different context in *That They May Face the Rising Sun*. His nickname was 'the bat'. He was certainly a creature of the night. We were waited on at table in the college by very young boys in their early teens from a Catholic orphanage. They were badly treated. They had crewcuts and looked like young convicts. They wore little white tunics. We were like aristocrats by comparison. De Valera had wanted to make Irish the official language, and it was easy for native Irish speakers. When I was a teacher in Clontarf, Dublin, I totted up the teaching hours, and found, to my amazement, that slightly more than half the day went on the teaching of Irish and religious instruction. I didn't take a job immediately after I qualified, and went to London for a number of months.

B.F.: So you spent the whole summer in England. Was it rough?

J.McG.: Oh yes. In "Hearts of Oak" there is a fairly accurate description of the working conditions on the buildings.

When I began teaching I got a school in Athboy, a town in the midlands. Two of the stories are set there, "A Ballad" and "Crossing the Line". An old man who was a teacher there, and appears in "Crossing the Line", came to see me recently. He was in his nineties. I looked at this story again and what interested me was how little of it was based on fact. The man that was the prototype is not like the man in the story at all. So life is of very little use to fiction; it has to be re-imagined or changed or altered in some way. The way things happen somehow is no use in fiction.

Dublin: a rich cultural experience.

J.McG.: And then I taught in a big town, Drogheda, thirty miles north of Dublin for a year. For a while I commuted between Dublin and Drogheda. Eventually I got a school in

Clontarf, near the sea. It was a middle-class area. I was there for about seven years, until I got sacked. Dublin at that time was an exciting place to be young in. There were many good small theater groups. I saw a lot of Pirandello and Tennessee Williams and Chekov, Eugene O'Neill, and people like that. Books were discussed in dance halls and bars as well as in rooms and there was a very good cinema on the quays where you saw films like *Casque d'or* and *The Rules of the Game* and *The Cranes are Flying*. People read a lot. There were very good second-hand book barrows. There was a man called Kelly who had a barrow on Henry Street and could find any book you wanted for half price. I'm sure he stole them all! He'd also have first editions of Beckett and people like that at not a great deal more than the price of new books. The two Irish writers that most excited us were Kavanagh and Beckett.

B.F.: He was a presence in the town.

J.McG.: Oh, he was an extraordinary presence, and in fact, there is a description of him in "Parachutes".

Jacques SOHIER: Why do you like Beckett?

J.McG.: I think Beckett is a great writer. What was very exciting is that you could open magazines, and new work was appearing by these great writers. Somehow when it's in magazines it's much fresher than a book that you're picking up for the first time. Kavanagh had twenty poems and it was some of his best work. I'll never forget the excitement of reading his poem *Prelude*: "Ignore power's schismatic sect/ Lovers alone, lovers protect."

L.L.: But Kavanagh was very much in Dublin, wasn't he? You met him?

B.F.: Had he become an institution in Dublin by that time?

J.McG.: Yes, I would have read his collected poems in manuscripts first. Kavanagh had no reputation much and of course he was very alcoholic, and a friend of mine called Jimmy Swift – *The Barracks* is dedicated to him – gathered up Kavangh's poems in manuscript, and had them typed. Kavanagh had written very well in the 40s, but there was a long period when he didn't write at all, or was engaged in various wars with people. Then he got cancer of the lung and he had to go into hospital. When he recovered, he wrote all those extraordinary Canal Bank poems. He changed, in a small way, like Beckett in a different way, the course of Irish writing. That's considered a famous poem now: "A year ago I fell in love with the functional ward of a chest hospital." He was an alarming presence, but if you met him early in the morning he could be very good company.

B.F.: The story "Bank Holiday" was written after his death?

J.McG.: Yes, it would have been after his death.

B.F.: Was he recognized as the poet?

J.McG.: Patrick McDonough is a completely fictional character in "Bank Holiday". There is one scene there based on a real incident. I was having a drink in Mooney's with two brothers and a girlfriend of mine. Unusually, Kavanagh was in the bar, as he always drank across the road in McDaid's. He recognized me and came over and asked me to cross the road to McDaid's to get him a packet of twenty *Gitanes*. I got round it, as I didn't want to be dancing to his tune, in very much the same way as Patrick McDonough gets round it in "Bank Holiday". Kavangh wasn't very pleased, though he did get his cigarettes, and abused me in very much the same way as he abused

McDonough in the story. I didn't mind. It would have been easier to have gone across and got him the cigarettes, and his vanity would have been salved; but I was young then.

B.F.: During these nine years as a teacher, did you write during the year or during the summertime? There was no teaching in the summer, was there?

J.McG.: No. I had a very good job for a writer because I taught seven and eight year-olds, which meant I had no teaching preparation and no corrections and taught for five days and was finished at two-fifteen. I'd walk back to my room, get my lunch, and walk into the city, which was an half-hour away. I'd stroll around the streets, maybe see what was on in the cinemas, buy a book, if I found something that interested me, and walk home. I'd then write for two or three hours a day. I've never written much longer than that, even when I had the whole day to myself. When I was finishing *The Barracks,* I remember just staying in the digs in Dublin. I had a room and worked right through the summer holidays.

Childhood years.

B.F.: So all the jobs, and the description of these jobs in the early stories such as catching the eels, those were earlier on in your life?

J.McG.: That's right. There was a family that went to school with me called the McMorrough. They were the last to fish the Boyle and the Shannon for a living. I never worked with them but actually knew how to fish for eel. I used to set eel lines myself. It was the sort of thing everybody did. I had a boat that belonged to the police barracks, and it was a way of escaping from the house, and I enjoyed fishing. We had a very strange upbringing. For most of the year we lived with our mother in various houses close to the schools where she taught and spent the school holidays with my father in the barracks. Shortly before she died we bought a farm and lived on the farm, which was close to my mothers school. I think we bought the farm because it was easier to find a farmhouse with land than to buy a house on its own.

L.L.: Then afterwards you had to go to the barracks to live?

J.McG.: When she died the farm was sold and we went to the barracks to live with my father. I've been reading my mother's letters recently, and it was brought home to me what an uncertain place the mind is. I remembered almost everything, but time was telescoped and events didn't happen at all in the way I remember them. For instance, the animals we owned were bought over a long period, while they seemed to me to have come with the farm. Likewise, with my mother's final illness. In my memory it took place over the long course of the year, while in fact it was for no more than six weeks in early summer. It was a very hard time, and I've never been happy about the way I wrote about the experience in *The Leavetaking*. Catholicism dominated everything. Heaven and Hell and Purgatory and Limbo were to us real places; the Church was the story that gave meaning to our lives over the whole course of the year – Christmas to Easter to Advent. I always admired that description of the Gothic churches: "Before the printed word, the churches were the Bibles of the poor," and the Catholic Church was our first book.

The priests had incredible authority, some of them were very frightening; and then, there were good priests. Nothing in human nature is simple. They had very hard lives

as well, in that they were cut off and isolated from the lives of other people they served. And then there was celibacy.

J.S.: John, do you think it is religion that makes men violent?

J.McG.: No. Ireland was always a very violent society, and, like most things there, it was very hidden there as well. There was also much sexual frustration. The authority was paternalistic. God the Father in Heaven, the Pope in Rome, the father who said the Rosary each night in the house.

J.S.: Too many Fathers then.

J.McG.: Probably. All authority was unquestioned. Men and women lived mostly separate lives. Men dominated the outside and the women dominated the houses, if they were not cowed by violence. Many of my father's generation would have fought through the War of Independence and the Civil War, and were steeped in violence.

The artistic process I: moulding reality.

Emmanuel VERNADAKIS: You said in several interviews that the artist may be in conflict with himself while the rhetorician is in conflict with society. Do you feel that, as an artist, you're in conflict with yourself and if so, do you think that this has to do with your religious education or with Christianity in general?

J.McG.: That goes back to something Yeats said, with which I agree: "Out of the quarrel with oneself comes poetry; out of the quarrel with others rhetoric comes." In a very different way, Rilke said much the same thing. If I had a rule for writing, it would be, "above all, no self-expression." The simple base of writing is the image, to be able to pick out of the welter of experience the image that illuminates. The rhythm is the emotional binding that links the images. I've made all my serious writing mistakes when I actually stuck close to the facts. For some reason or other, they have to be re-imagined, reinvented, reshaped. They have to conform to an idea but not an idea of oneself. Then you start to work with the words. Flaubert got everything right when he said in his letters to George Sand, "In order to write well, you have to feel deeply and think clearly in order to find the right words." Nothing has changed.

L.L.: Yes, it is like moulding a matter in something, making something out of it.

J.McG.: Yes. By the time it is finished, it should reflect the original idea, but it has often very little to do with the first draft. The story "Bank Holiday" went through many drafts, and began as a completely different story. The original idea was based on a man who was very attractive to women and had many affairs. One of the women he seduced and rejected set out in turn to seduce him, and succeeded. They married. On their wedding night he was warned by some instinct, and pulled back the bedclothes to find her waiting for him with an open razor. In the various workings, all that was lost, and the story became "Bank Holiday."

L.L.: That's what you said before when you spoke of dislocation, dislocated?

J.McG.: That's right. All material has to be dramatized, and to do that it nearly always has to be dislocated.

I never write anything unless it is in my head for a long time. And then I really am compelled to write it down to see what's there. How can I know what I think until I see what I say? You learn from the words, and, after many workings, the words become

alive and speak back. Sometimes when an idea is written down it disappears in the working. There was never anything interesting there in the first place; but it is only through work that these things are discovered.

L.L.: Would you say that it is the same with the voices, because when we read your short stories or *That They May Face the Rising Sun*, the voices of people are very important and they come... Do you hear the people?

J.McG.: Oh yes. *That They May Face the Rising Sun* was much longer when it was finished. A lot of the material was cut out. By the end of a novel you know so much about the characters that you could put them into any situation and know exactly how they will behave. Only a little of what you know gets into the final pages. Sometimes I think all bad writing is statement and all good writing suggestion. The readers take up the suggestion and complete the book in their imaginations. I believe there are as many versions of a book as the true readers it may find.

B.F.: Do stories begin more in your mind with an image or with a dramatic situation, or...?

J.McG.: Often with a scene or a rhythm or a piece of dialogue or an image. There is an enormous difference between a novel and a story. The novel is closely connected with society, with an idea of manners and society and is a whole world, while the short story is a fragment. A short story has a different rhythm than a novel. It makes one point and one point only. Everything in a short story goes to a certain point and leads away from that point. If you had the same intensity over the whole length of a novel, it would become tiresome. I think that the short story is much more connected with drama or the poem than the novel. A short story is like a flash that illuminates one point. What happened before that point and what happened afterwards can only be imagined.

B.F.: Have you ever started writing a novel that had to be broken up into two or three short stories? I was thinking of "Eddie Mac" and "The Conversion of William Kirkwood"?

J.McG.: No. They are close to a form I admire, the novella. The "Country Funeral" is a novella. In contrast, "Korea" is a classic short story. I don't mean classic in the sense of good but classic in the sense of brevity and rhythm and intensity. So is "Why we're here"; "Gold Watch" and those longer stories are closer to the novella. I love Turgenev's work and I think Turgenev's novels are closer to the novella than to long, traditional novels like *War and Peace*.

The barracks.

L.L.: Are there some of the short stories which are some of your favourites or some you dislike among those you wrote? I remember that you said once that "The Stoat" was not one of your favourite short stories.

J.McG.: No. I think "The Key" or "Bomb Box" suffer because they are too close to life, the way things happened and weren't dislocated enough. "The Key" is based on an actual incident. My father decided that he was not getting enough attention and that he was going to die. He left instructions for his funeral, and set off for the Garda Hospital in Dublin. There was nothing wrong with him, and they kicked him out after a week. He had to come home, and he was in a rage.

My aunt was a lovely woman and she disliked my father. She used to ask him in a sweet voice: "Well Frank, may I inquire where is the pain located today?" I gave her a copy of *The Barracks*. I doubt if she read it, as she was dying of cancer herself at the time and the

story would have disturbed her. She probably thumbed through it. My father used to sow onions, and he dried the onions on the roof of a urinal that belonged to the guards. She spotted this detail in the novel, and was in stitches laughing, and she said "John, I thought I would never see the day when I'd see shitey arse's onions drying up on the roof of a lavatory in a book!" She had a little shop beside the railway station. A priest who was a customer removed *The Barracks* from the library because he had some objection to the material or language. She accosted him: "Father, I hear you took John's book out of the library;" and when he admitted that he had, she told him "You can buy your cigarettes elsewhere until you put that book back into the library."

It was a very strange upbringing I had. I suppose all upbringings are strange. I had no background in writing. Recently, my sisters told me that they would have been ashamed to tell people they met socially that their brother was a writer.

B.F.: There were images of revolt, though, of your father holding the priest by the ear and your aunt telling the priest to get out of the shop!

J.McG.: That's right. My father was violent. He went into the guards straight after fighting in the I.R.A. in the War of Independence. He was instantly promoted because of his rank in the guerrilla company to which he had belonged. He would have entered the army as an officer, and probably would have been promoted further or killed in civil war. He expected promotion in the police, and was bitter when he didn't get it. My guess is that once the peace was established he was seen as far too difficult and dangerous for promotion, and they kept him where he was. I was on television a couple of years ago and the curator of Garda Museum saw me and sent me my father's police file. It was interesting. On his application form in 1920, both his sponsers were parish priests, which showed how closely the priests ran everything. There was a question. "Previous work experience?" and the answer was "Three years in IRA!" There was a gang called Dohertys that raided banks in Leitrim. My father was the sergeant in charge of the town when they raided the bank in Ballinamore. He always complained about the Irish police not being allowed to carry arms. He said if he was armed on the day of the bank robbery in Ballinamore, that not one of the Dohertys would have left the town alive. I believed him.

He would have seen a lot of violence, but he never spoke about it. My sister was telling me recently that she was walking with him in Dublin shortly before he died and he pointed out a little place near Dublin Castle, and he said "I was lying there three nights, covering an escape route from Dublin Castle." None of these people ever talked about the war.

L.L.: Talking about the title, we were talking about "The Key" and about "The Bomb Box". How do you choose the title?

J.McG.: A short story generally chooses its own title. This is because it is dramatic and usually makes only one point, which gives the title. I always find it difficult to find titles for novels. I think this is because the novel reflects many more varieties of experience and is more closely connected to the whole of society. The short story is a fragment.

Linda COLLINGE: Some of your titles seem to be rather obscure and not obviously linked to the main theme of the story. They seem to be secondary, say something like “Sierra Leone”, which is not in fact about Sierra Leone, or “Swallows”.

J.McG.: They were not meant to be obscure. Sierra Leone is elsewhere, and the point is that it is always much easier to deal with something that is elsewhere than in the life that’s around you.

L.C.: And with a story like “Swallows”?

J.McG.: That’s probably a pun. The swallows come like the surveyor, and then disappear. The sergeant swallows a lot of whiskey in order to get through the day. A story like “Swallows” would be set in the barracks but it is completely invented.

There is one thing that might be interesting about the barracks. Because of the long history of oppression in Ireland, law was associated with the British. Until very recently, the people never thought that the police force belonged to them. It was seen as an alien force, a hostile force. Children like ourselves who came from the barracks were seen by other children as coming from a hostile place. We were slightly cut off from the other children and the community at large.

B.F.: Was there a housekeeper in the barracks? In “Swallows” there is the deaf…

J.McG.: My father never could cook, so he always had housekeepers, even when he was a single man. Then after a while my sisters became the housekeepers but we had housekeepers until quite late. And nearly all kind of disturbed, eccentric people. My father was very handsome, so some of them used to think that he would marry them. There was a parson’s daughter that quoted Shakespeare and she was intent to marry him. My father was very brutal and I remember the answer that he gave her: “So you think you are the man for the job?”

The guards at the barracks had to cycle in good weather and bad, along roads where nothing happened, and then had to write reports. I used to help them sometimes. We would invent reports. These books were inspected by the Superintendent who would come once a month. The thing they dreaded was having to take mentally disturbed people to the asylum in Ballinasloe. The petty offences they had to deal with, people cycling at night without lights on their bicycles. My father was fond of scolding people. He caught a man without a light on his bicycle once and lectured him for fifteen or twenty minutes. The man said “For Christ's Sake, Sergeant, lay off the sermon. Either let me off or give me a summons!” My father had no sense of humour and gave him a summons.

There was a very good school in Carrick-on-Shannon run by the Presentation Brothers. I got a scholarship there when I was thirteen, and I cycled the seven miles to Carrick-on-Shannon. Those were some of the five best years of my life. My father used to keep me at home for work, cutting turf or digging potatoes and things like that. The principal of the school came out and told my father that I was one of the best students he had ever had, and I could go anywhere but not if I was kept at home for six or ten weeks every year. This was a surprise to my father, but after that I wasn’t kept at home to work. I had a good memory, and often to entertain myself I’d recite poems, pieces from Shakespeare or Wordsworth or Tennyson as I cycled along.

B.F.: So the bicycle was an education too...

J.McG.: Everybody cycled because there were hardly any cars and the roads were very bad. During the break in school, we would have a little milk and bread. A tomato was a luxury. Many of us would spend our lunchtimes fixing punctures on our bicycles. The teachers were very good and I have nothing but gratitude for them. I went from Carrick-on-Shannon to the teaching college in Dublin.

The artistic process II: "areas of experience".

John Paine: You began by saying that a writer needs to be a reader first.

J.McG.: Yes. I could not imagine anybody being a writer unless they were a reader first. I read for nothing but pleasure.

J.P.: This is obviously amazingly alive for you even today. In the last couple of days when I have been around you, the poetry, the lines from various things that you've been able to summon.

J.McG.: They become part of your lives.

J.P.: What role do you see that playing in your own creative process?

J.McG.: Not much. I think that they are two completely different things. I did refer to it in the introduction to Alistair MacLeod's stories. I think that every serious writer has a limited area of experience. You see that most clearly in Scott Fitzgerald. I think that *The Great Gatsby* is a great novel and stories like "May Day" or "The Rich Boy". Once Fitzgerald moves outside that area of experience, his work, though it is always carefully crafted, becomes less exciting. The serious writer always has to discover for himself that limited area of experience.

I don't think you should write unless you need to, and the whole machinery of publishing is against this. There is an enormous pressure to turn out a book every two years. The only way you can do this is to go on repeating yourself, when every book should be a new beginning, and that means that a whole new set of aesthetic problems have to be solved each time.

L.L.: That is what we find in *That They May Face the Rising Sun* because we have got the same ingredients as in the short stories of before – the people, the area – and it is totally different; you found a new shape out of some material which is there.

J.McG.: Yes. Also the experience has changed. It has become gentler.

L.L.: Yes, more reconciled.

J.McG.: I think it is much more a real novel than any of my other novels.

L.L.: In what sense?

J.McG.: I think it's a whole world to itself.

B.F.: There are chapters in *Amongst Women*. It's almost as if you are reading a short story.

J.McG.: It's probably as pared down as a novel can be without becoming a short story, and the opening is very like the opening of a short story. As he grew older he became afraid of his daughters... I get a lot of letters about *Amongst Women.* Moran seems to have been a very common type and was present everywhere in the country, and the whole of Ireland seems to function like a very large family. Ireland isn't a very organized society, like France or Britain. There isn't any recognized system of manners. The manners and the mentalities change very quickly from locality to localitiy.

Everybody within a family is an astute psychologist of the other people within the family. If you hear somebody say "Well, you know she is not going to change now" or "There is no use talking to him" you know that it's spoken out of a great deal of psychological knowledge. Whereas, in fact, it is a kind of nonsense in the sense of formal manners. I see the family as a strange halfway-house between the individual and a more developed sense of manners. Certain things are tolerated within families that won't be tolerated in a larger society. It has been well proved psychologically that if there is a stronger psychological person within a family, even though he or she is quite stupid, he, by his force, will actually dominate the more intelligent people within the family.

J.S.: Is there some kind of violence in women too? I am thinking of the novel *Amongst Women.*

J.McG.: I think that *Amongst Women* is really a novel about power. The power comes to the women in a circuitous way. In fact, at the very end of the novel, the power is transferred to the women. What they will do with it we do not know.

J.S.: You mentioned yesterday that the short story is closer to poetry (Yes). And in poetry the syntax is more disjointed than in a complete sentence. Do you write sentences more than words?

J.McG.: You always write sentences because you hope they make sense. I would argue that prose has invaded certain areas that used to belong to verse. Nobody is going to tell me that *The Great Gatsby* is an inferior poem to some bad poet who writes in verse. And there is no doubt that certain temperaments – which has got to do with the personality of the writer – work better in verse than in prose. For instance Philip Larkin, who is a great poet, wrote a couple of poor novels. Yeats, in my opinion, doesn't write well in prose. The amazing thing about Hardy is that he could write well in both verse and prose. He is a great poet and he is also an important novelist. But that's very rare.

L.C.: In the closures of your short stories, there is often a sort of dispersion rather than a rounding off. They seem very open towards something, not really an ending.

J.McG.: I don't think a short story is ever ended. I think a short story is like an explosion, and that the energy that it attracts throws light back to things that happened before the story began and after it ends.

L.L.: Is it difficult sometimes to find the final words?

J.McG.: Yes. Often the last thing that you write is either the beginning or the end. Sometimes I leave a short story unfinished for two or three months because I can't get a satisfactory ending. Then, somehow, it comes.

B.F.: Is that why you may not be completely satisfied with "The Stoat", because the ending is the same as the beginning?

J.McG.: I don't know. I rather like the idea of a short story, or anything else, ending as it began: "In my end is my beginning."

L.L.: It is more finding the proper ending or the proper words, not even finding how it is going to finish but the way it is going to be put into words.

J.McG.: And it must resonate backwards into the story and also take the story outwards as well.

1